Grain Data Collected By CIA

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The Central Intelligence Agency has been collecting detailed information from private U.S. companies on their sales of grain to the Soviet Union and other countries, even though the same data is gathered by the Department of Agriculture.

The grain export information — obtained by the agency's domestic collections branch, which often debriefs businessmen who travel abroad — is used to make assessments of the strategic balance in grain supplies.

CIA officials have indicated in the past that they consider grain supplies to be an important element of national security, and possibly a useful gauge of international behavior of the Soviet Union, a major grain importer.

A recent series of detailed CIA inquiries to grain companies includes requests for information on worldwide Russian demand for grain, and estimates of world sales to the Soviet Union, or East Europe, including American grain sales on a weekly basis. A Department of Agriculture spokesman said yesterday that he had no idea why the CIA was collecting the information. In 1973, Congress gave the department responsibility for compiling weekly reports of all grain sales abroad. In addition to those weekly reports, U.S.-based firms are now required to inform the department within 24 hours of any sale exceeding 100,000 metric tons. Referring to the duplicate commercial export intelligence gathering of the CIA, the chief of one major grain company said this week: "They stay in touch with us all the time."

Edward W. Cook, chairman of the board of Cook Industries, Inc., of Memphis, said in an interview that he often reports the same information to both the CIA and the Agriculture Department. "They stay in contact with people who are doing business with areas in which they are interested," he

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said. "It could be Brazil, could be Russia, or it could be France." Cook said the CIA gets no more information about the sales than the Agriculture Department gets, adding, "There doesn't seem to be much coordination in Washington." A department official said recently that it sometimes seemed that the CIA's export data was reaching top officials of the Agriculture Department before the department's own. CIA officials could not be reached for comment yesterday.